

TJHSST Admissions - December 2020 School Board Meeting

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**Changes already approved (October 2020 work session):**

- No test, no admissions fee, and no teacher recommendations (although reconsidering)
- Expanded student population from 500 to 550/grade

**Debating the Admissions Process for the Class of 2025 (current 8<sup>th</sup> graders):**

- Hybrid “Merit” Lottery
- Holistic Review

**SUMMARY:** I strongly support FCPS’s goal to increase diversity at TJ.<sup>1</sup> It is the right thing to do. In addition, our family knows firsthand the importance of this issue. When my husband moved from his native Puerto Rico to Miami, he was discriminated against by his middle school until one math teacher stepped in and changed his life. This is important work.

However, the FCPS presentation, proposed lottery, and white paper FAIL to recognize VA law, requirements for a Governor’s School, the very purpose of TJHSST, and gifted education as a whole.

- The FCPS White Paper skips over the very first sentence of FCPS Policy 3355.4: “Purpose: To establish a high school for science and technology where students with ***exceptional quantitative skills and interest in science, technology, engineering, or mathematics***, can pursue higher levels of academic achievement in those subjects ...”<sup>2</sup>
- Again, as skipped entirely by the White Paper, Policy 3355.4 includes: “The Fairfax County School Board shall operate a high school for science and technology to provide a challenging educational opportunity to students who have ***demonstrated exceptional achievement, aptitude, commitment, intellectual curiosity, passion, and creativity in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics***.”

FCPS also includes statistics that flatly contradict their own assertions. Instead, it repeats the misconception that there are not enough black, Hispanic, twice-exceptional (2E), or low-income students who could only qualify for TJ by lottery, suggesting that they cannot pass a holistic review.

Finally, by changing the Admissions process, *again*, FCPS will have cover to say they “did something” when, in fact, they continue to fail to support, enrich, mentor, or recruit historically underrepresented gifted students. Research and best practice recognize many effective ways to identify, mentor, enrich, and support students of color, 2E students, or low-income students for gifted programs, STEM, and competitive high schools and colleges. Every year that we focus on the TJ admissions process *without* taking the pipeline seriously is another year that we fail those children, their more represented peers, and the diversity that we all seek.

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<sup>1</sup> Current TJ freshman class: 6 Black, 16 Hispanic, 26 Multiracial/Other, 86 White, and 355 Asian students.

<http://www.fcag.org/TJ%20Admissions%20class%20of%202024.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> FCPS Policy 3355.4 - [https://go.boarddocs.com/vsba/fairfax/Board.nsf/files/9BHHQF4997CB/\\$file/P3355.pdf](https://go.boarddocs.com/vsba/fairfax/Board.nsf/files/9BHHQF4997CB/$file/P3355.pdf)

Put simply, we are Fairfax -- we should *rise up* historically unrepresented students, instead of making the false assumption that they can't compete.

On December 17<sup>th</sup>, the FCPS School Board should:

- ◆ Vote for a Holistic Review;
- ◆ Attach funding and accountability metrics to ensure increased applications from historically unrepresented minority students; and
- ◆ Should give clear and concrete guidance to FCPS leadership of your policy expectations regarding the pipeline. I would be happy to discuss my comprehensive suggestions on this part.

**KEY ISSUES:** TJ is a Virginia Governor's School:

*"The Virginia Governor's School Program has been designed to assist divisions as they meet the needs of a small population of students whose **learning levels are remarkably different from their age-level peers**. The foundation of the Virginia Governor's School Program centers on best practices in the field of **gifted education** and the presentation of advanced content to able learners."*

Per state law, schools must identify "gifted students" using very specific criteria (see next page).

However, the Superintendent's November 17<sup>th</sup> presentation and the White Paper, posted on November 17, 2020 and again in December work session, do not even include the mention of "gifted" students. The term is *wholly excluded*.<sup>3</sup>

**A lottery does not satisfy any of the legal requirements, nor does it satisfy the intent of a Governors School for gifted students.**

As a result, FCPS leadership and School Board are also failing to address the underlying issues that lead to the lack of diversity, even referring interchangeably to all Black and Hispanic children as low-income. Leadership is willing to dismantle the #1 ranked high school in the country, but yet nobody could answer the question of why so few Black and Hispanic students applied – because leadership never held meaningful stakeholder conversations amongst diverse gifted populations or even ONE public hearing on the subject. Moreover, FCPS has not meaningfully funded or implemented Young Scholars program or conducted a recruitment drive for racially diverse 8<sup>th</sup> graders.

**GOVERNOR'S SCHOOLS:** The VA Department of Education created the Full-time Governor's Schools in 1998 as a way to *serve gifted students*.<sup>4</sup>

#### PURPOSE OF THE GOVERNOR'S SCHOOLS

Governor's Schools give *gifted students* academic and visual and performing arts opportunities beyond those normally available in the students' home schools. Students are able to focus on a specific area of intellectual or artistic strength and interest and to study in a way that *best suits the gifted learner's needs*. Each program stresses non-traditional teaching and learning techniques. ...

The Virginia Governor's School Program has been designed to assist divisions *as they meet the needs of a small*

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<sup>3</sup> The term "gifted" is mentioned on page 40 of the page 44 White Paper, but only in an Appendix.

<sup>4</sup> VA DOE website - [https://www.doe.virginia.gov/instruction/governors\\_school\\_programs/academic\\_year/index.shtml](https://www.doe.virginia.gov/instruction/governors_school_programs/academic_year/index.shtml)

*population of students whose learning levels are remarkably different from their age-level peers.* The foundation of the Virginia Governor's School Program centers on best practices in the field of *gifted education* and the presentation of advanced content to able learners.

Based on *gifted education*, TJ was created FOR *students whose learning levels are remarkably different from their age-level peers*. THIS is the very definition of a full-time Governor's School.

It makes sense that there is a correlation between those deemed eligible for AAP Level IV and those who pass the first round of testing for TJ, because the school was *intended to serve this very subset of gifted students*.

TJ was created around the time of the technology boom in Northern Virginia to spur our gifted students into going into science and support NoVa's burgeoning tech economy. In the very week that Covid-19 vaccines are being distributed after the fastest, most successful scientific collaboration amongst the brightest scientists worldwide, bringing gifted students together to study science and technology is even more important than ever.

As noted above, FCPS should be working toward increasing TJ's diversity without destroying its original purpose. This can be done through a holistic review. It cannot be done through a lottery.

**IDENTIFYING GIFTED STUDENTS IN VA:** VA law requires that school divisions must identify gifted K-12 students and provide instructional services to meet their needs.<sup>5</sup>

Per VA Law, Chapter 40, REGULATIONS GOVERNING EDUCATIONAL SERVICES FOR GIFTED STUDENTS (8VAC20-40-10)

"Gifted students" means those students in public elementary, middle, and secondary schools beginning with kindergarten through twelfth grade who **demonstrate high levels of accomplishment** or who show **the potential for higher levels of accomplishment** when compared to others of the same age, experience, or environment. **Their aptitudes and potential for accomplishment are so outstanding that they require special programs to meet their educational needs.**

➤ ***"Their aptitudes and potential for accomplishment are so outstanding that they require special programs to meet their educational needs."***

***These students will be identified by professionally qualified persons through the use of multiple criteria as having potential or demonstrated aptitudes in one or more of the following:***

The identification process used by each school division must ensure that no single criterion is used to determine a student's eligibility. The identification process shall include at least three measures from the following categories:

- a. Assessment of appropriate student products, performance, or portfolio;
- b. Record of observation of in-classroom behavior;
- c. Appropriate rating scales, checklists, or questionnaires;
- d. Individual interview;
- e. Individually administered or group-administered, nationally norm-referenced aptitude or achievement tests;

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<sup>5</sup> [https://www.doe.virginia.gov/instruction/gifted\\_ed/index.shtml](https://www.doe.virginia.gov/instruction/gifted_ed/index.shtml)

- f. Record of previous accomplishments (such as awards, honors, grades, etc.); or
  - g. Additional valid and reliable measures or procedures.
5. If a program is designed to address *specific academic aptitude*, an individually administered or group-administered, *nationally norm-referenced aptitude or achievement test shall be included* as one of the three measures used in the school division's identification procedures.

The process shall include the review of information or data from multiple sources to determine whether a student's aptitudes and learning needs are most appropriately served through the school division's **gifted education** program.<sup>6</sup>

"**Learning needs** of gifted students" means gifted students' needs for advanced and complex content that is paced and sequenced to respond to their persistent intellectual, artistic, or technical curiosity; exceptional problem-solving abilities; rapid acquisition and mastery of information; conceptual thinking processes; and imaginative expression across a broad range of disciplines.

**NEED FOR HOLISTIC REVIEW:** VA DOE includes a link to the state's work on increasing diversity in gifted programs, including referral process, talent development (i.e., Young Scholars), changes to identification process, professional development, and parent education. *It highlights the importance of a multitude of tests and a holistic review* (see the last page summary).

[https://www.doe.virginia.gov/instruction/gifted\\_ed/increasing-diversity.pdf](https://www.doe.virginia.gov/instruction/gifted_ed/increasing-diversity.pdf)

**LAWSUIT:** "The lawsuit claims that TJ, as one of nearly 20 "Governor's Schools" across the state, is required under state law and regulations to provide education to students who have been designated as gifted through the administration of a recognized aptitude test, like the one that has been used in the past as part of the TJ admissions process. ... Changing the admissions process to eliminate the test violates those procedures, the lawsuit alleges." See VA law above for identifying gifted students. They are also alleging that the change would discriminate against Asian Americans. <https://www.nbcwashington.com/news/local/lawsuit-challenges-admissions-changes-at-elite-public-school-in-virginia/2465052/>

**DISPELLING MYTHS ABOUT GIFTED CHILDREN:** The VA DOE website also links to MYTHS about gifted children, including myths that have been repeated recently by School Board Members:

- ◆ Teachers Challenge All The Students, So Gifted Kids Will Be Fine In The Regular Classroom
- ◆ All Children are gifted
- ◆ Acceleration placement options are socially harmful for gifted children
- ◆ Gifted Program Options are Elitist
- ◆ And others (like about 2E students, emotional and mental health issues, etc.)

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<sup>6</sup> [https://www.doe.virginia.gov/instruction/gifted\\_ed/gifted\\_regulations.pdf](https://www.doe.virginia.gov/instruction/gifted_ed/gifted_regulations.pdf)

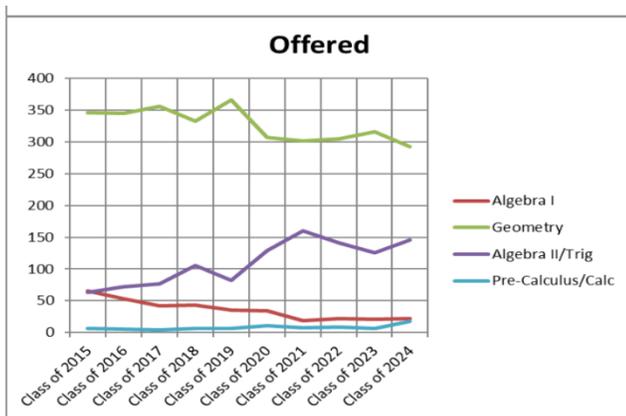
All FCPS School Board members and senior staff should read this one-pager on dispelling “Myths about Gifted Children. It is critical to understanding and action. <https://www.nagc.org/myths-about-gifted-students>

**DIFFERENCES IN CRITERIA:** FCPS leadership has suggested new criteria for TJ Applicants – 3.5 GPA, some required honors classes, and Algebra 1 by 8<sup>th</sup> grade. If FCPS uses only a lottery, the proposed criteria alone represent a huge jump from previous admissions:

- **BASIC REQUIREMENTS:** According to FCPS Leadership at the December 7<sup>th</sup> School Board Work Session, based on this criteria, 4300 8<sup>th</sup> graders would qualify out of 13,000 8<sup>th</sup> graders. **That represents 1/3 of the student population.**
- **GRADES:** According to FCPS White Paper and the October 6, 2020 Work Session presentation, the mean of previous accepted students’ unweighted grades was much higher than 3.5. It was consistently **3.96** or **3.97:**

Unweighted GPA for accepted students (end of course 7th grade and first quarter 8th grade marks)

Year	2019-20	2018-19	2017-18	2016-17	2015-16	2014-2015
Range	3.31 – 4.00	3.43 – 4.00	3.47 – 4.00	3.66 – 4.00	3.51 – 4.00	3.05 – 4.00
Mean	3.96	3.96	3.97	3.97	3.97	3.97



- **MATH:** According to the FCPS White Paper posted on November 17<sup>th</sup> (page 44) and the October 6<sup>th</sup> presentation, **all but about 25 previous 8<sup>th</sup> graders took Algebra 1.**

By contrast to 25 students who took Algebra 1, approximately:

- ◆ 300 students took Geometry,
- ◆ 150 took Algebra 2, and
- ◆ 25 took Pre-Calculus/Calculus.

So, the new standard of Algebra 1 by 8<sup>th</sup> grade would be

based on the **bottom 5% of students** previously.

See link to the FCPS October 6<sup>th</sup> Work Session presentation.<sup>7</sup>

If the FCPS votes for a Lottery using these proposed criteria, this FCPS School Board would have failed to satisfy the VA law for a Governor’s School, summarily changed the very “purpose” of TJHSST, and dramatically reduced the expectation of rigor to the bottom 5% in math.

- That does not satisfy the definition of **“a small population of students whose learning levels are remarkably different from their age-level peers.”**

<sup>7</sup> <https://go.boarddocs.com/vsba/fairfax/Board.nsf/files/BU5MUK5C03C0/%24file/Next%20Step%20Responses.pdf>

- That does not satisfy the requirement that “[t]heir aptitudes and potential for accomplishment are so outstanding that they require special programs to meet their educational needs.”
- That does not satisfy the stated purpose of TJHSST, as amended in 2014: FCPS Policy 3355.4: “Purpose: To establish a high school for science and technology where students with **exceptional quantitative skills and interest in science, technology, engineering, or mathematics...**” for “students who have **demonstrated exceptional achievement, aptitude, commitment, intellectual curiosity, passion, and creativity in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics.**”

**REGIONAL APPROACH:** Finally, FCPS leadership has proposed a “regional approach” to both the Lottery and the Holistic Review. This is a faulty approach for the following reasons.

In 2014, FCPS was split into five regions,<sup>8</sup> with the intent to save administrative costs and to assure socio-economic balance in each region.<sup>9</sup> As such, each region has higher-income and lower-income communities within the region. It just so happens to be that **Region 1’s** Rachel Carson Middle School, **Region 2’s** Longfellow, Kilmer, and Luther Jackson Middle School students, and **Region 5’s** Rocky Run Middle Schools students have contributed the highest number of applicants to TJ in previous years. Not coincidentally, those regions also represent the areas of the Technology Corridor, Tysons Corner, Route 28 near Dulles, and the new Silverline metro. They also represent a significant number of eligible Black students (see FCAG memo; note - without the honors requirements), those students also take the highest math classes, and those middle schools house AAP Centers.



Table 3. Lottery-Eligible Black Students by FCPS Region

	Number of Eligible Black Students	Number of Eligible Students of All Races	Proportion of Eligible Black Students
Region 1	42	1391	3%
Region 2	82	1214	6.8%
Region 3	128	850	15%
Region 4	111	1432	7.8%
Region 5	59	1429	4%

Table 4 shows that the percentage of eligible applicants taking each level of math course also varies substantially by FCPS Region. For example, among the 175 FCPS 8<sup>th</sup> graders with a 3.5 GPA currently taking Algebra II or higher, 76 students have a base school in Region 1, while one (1) student has a base school in Region 3.

Table 4. Distribution of 8th grade math course among students meeting merit criteria in each region

	Algebra 1	Geometry	Algebra 2/Trig or Higher
Region 1	905	410	76
Region 2	841	344	29
Region 3	687	162	1
Region 4	1087	319	26
Region 5	1010	376	43

Because these “regions” are a newly created administrative entity, according to FCPS itself, a regional approach will lead to a higher proportion of *white students*, and a significantly lower proportion of Asian students, but it will not necessarily result in *significantly* more Hispanic and African-American students. The numbers were presented in the FCPC White Paper. Looking at the range of percentages given on page 27, in one model, there would be only FIVE (5) Black students accepted, an even SMALLER number than in the Class of 2024!

A regional approach will pit Region 2 and Region 5 students against each other for limited spots while, most definitely, excluding students who need TJ.<sup>10</sup> Instead, FCPS should set a “minimum” number of offers from each region, but not a “maximum,” as discussed by School Board Members in the December 7<sup>th</sup> work session.

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.fcps.edu/sites/default/files/media/pdf/1%20RegionsSY2019-20%20County%20Border.pdf>

<sup>9</sup> <https://annandaleva.blogspot.com/2014/05/fcps-superintendent-garza-reorganizes.html>

<sup>10</sup> [Diversity with Excellence at TJ Report.pdf \(fcag.org\)](#) (page 7)

## WHAT COULD GO WRONG?

TJHSST was LITERALLY ranked #1 last year (2019), which continues to generate good public relations about how FCPS is a “good school district” – leading businesses and residents alike to come to Fairfax County. And now, the very next year, the FCPS School Board may be about to destroy TJ.

- ◆ From Wiki -- In its 2019 report evaluating almost 18,000 public high schools, [U.S. News & World Report](#) ranked TJ as the best overall high school in the United States.<sup>[16]</sup> In 2016, the school placed first in Newsweek's annual "America's Top High Schools" rankings for the third consecutive year.
- ◆ The school had 14 Intel Science Talent Search Semifinalists in 2007,<sup>[20]</sup> 15 in 2009,<sup>[21]</sup> and 13 in 2010.<sup>[22]</sup>
- ◆ In 2007, for schools with more than 800 students in grades 10–12, TJ was cited as having the highest-performing [AP](#) Calculus BC, AP Chemistry, AP French Language, AP Government and Politics, U.S., and AP U.S. History courses among all schools worldwide.<sup>[23]</sup> In 2014, 3864 AP Exams were taken by students; over 97% earned a score of 3, 4, or 5.
- ◆ TJ<sup>3</sup>Sat project - The Systems Engineering Course designed and built a [CubeSat](#) which was launched on November 19, 2013, from [Wallops Flight Facility](#) in Virginia. [Orbital Sciences Corporation](#) donated the CubeSat Kit to the school on December 6, 2006 and provided the launch for the satellite. After a successful launch at 8:15PM, TJ<sup>3</sup>SAT became the first satellite launched into space that was built by high school students.<sup>[44]</sup>
- ◆ President [Barack Obama](#) signed the [America Invents Act](#) into law on September 16, 2011, *at the school*. The law was made to reform [U.S. patent laws](#).<sup>[24]</sup>

During a worldwide pandemic, while we are waiting for the approval of a Covid-19 vaccine created by collaboration by the brightest scientific minds in the world, Fairfax County School Board could approve a change to the admissions requirements of its #1 school, so much so that it would fail to satisfy the legal requirements of a Governors School and the reason why it was created. A lottery would also telegraph to our community that it had no choice but to lower its standards significantly to improve its diversity.

**Instead, FCPS should conduct meaningful outreach and a holistic review of TJ applicants. This will maintain the rigor, reputation, and intent of the school, while still increasing the diversity – just like colleges do.**

In 2021, the School Board should continue to address the underlying long-term issues.

**QUESTIONS:** Thank you for your hard work on this important and complicated issue. If you have any questions, I would be happy to answer them. I can be reached at [konde@SKpolicy.com](mailto:konde@SKpolicy.com).